

The Chief of Staff's Book of the Quarter

Why The Allies Won, Richard Overy



In the late spring and early summer of 1942, the armed forces of the Axis powers, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan, seemed on the

verge of making good their attempts to achieve global domination. In Russia, German armor was racing across the vast steppes, apparently near to successfully seizing control of the great oil producing regions of the Caucasus. In North Africa, German and Italian troops had sent the British, weakened by almost three years of fighting, reeling back into Egypt and seemed on the verge of taking the vital Suez Canal. In the Pacific, the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy had ranged across huge areas in an apparently unstoppable series of conquests. In the Atlantic, U-Boats and surface raiders threatened to snap the maritime lifeline between the United States and Great Britain as the debris of shattered oil tankers washed up on American beaches.

Less than three years later, Germany was a hollow shell of shattered cities and occupied by Allied soldiers; Italy was utterly prostrate, with Fascist dreams of glory a bitter, unpleasant memory; and Imperial Japan lay at the mercy of its foes, its Army and Navy crushed beyond recovery.

In retrospect, given the latent industrial and economic strength of the Allies--especially the United States--the outcome seems inevitable. But was it? That is the issue Richard Overy tackles in trying to answer the simple question: How did the Allies win World War II? It is a question that is rarely ever asked. With the advantage of hindsight, Allied victory "is taken for granted." Even asking the question suggests that, indeed, the outcome might have been very different. Even if the Axis were denied outright victory, it is certainly plausible that the Allies might have been forced to accept a negotiated settlement. Far from being a simple question, argues Overy, "there are no simple answers. Much of what we believe about the war is illusion."

Fundamentally, there is no question that the Allies' materiel advantages vastly outweighed those of the Axis. In 1943, the three Axis powers produced 43,000 aircraft of all types; the Allies manufactured 151,000, many of them improved models, superior to those of their opponents. However, this kind of exercise in tabulation does not tell the entire story. Overy believes the Allies won because of their success (and the Axis failure) in six different areas: Coral Sea and Midway, The Battle of the Atlantic, Stalingrad and Kursk, the tactical air war, the strategic bombing air war, and the Normandy invasion. As Overy concentrates on specific battles and campaigns within the above settings, he analyzes the impact that technology, leadership, and materiel production had in their outcome. Finally, he looks at the influence of fighting in a moral contest - good vs. evil. Unlike most accounts of the war, this is not a narrative account following events in straight chronological order. Instead, Overy weaves his analysis around events, reaching some interesting and sometimes provocative conclusions in the process.

Why the Allies Won is almost unique among studies of World War II in the way Overy brings together the various elements of science, manufacturing, combat strategies and doctrines, leadership, and the moral issues raised. Among other virtues, Overy offers a concise and sharply reasoned look at the little understood or studied war on the Eastern Front as well as insight into the conduct of the air war in both Europe and the Pacific. *Why the Allies Won* offers an excellent overview of how outcomes in modern war flow directly from the complex interaction of a wide array of technological, ideological, economic, and political choices, none of which can be decisive alone and none of which can be known as more important than any other in advance.

Editor's Note: *Each quarter, one of the books from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force's Reading List will be spot-lighted as the book of the quarter. Air Force members of all ranks and grades are encouraged to read the featured title available at all Air Force libraries. For details on forming a book discussion group visit the CSAF's Reading List web site: <http://www.af.mil/readinglist>.*